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US not the mastermind of Chile's coup

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WASHINGTON — The clash of police and protesters on the streets of Santiago has become a recurring event. The turmoil and violence stimulates a kaleidoscope of nightmarish memories of the coup which toppled the Allende regime. With America's gaze already focused southward, Chile's continuing problems and the 10th anniversary of the overthrow of Allende this week provoked a considerable amount of commentary and editorializing about the perceived responsibility of the United States for the coup of 1973.

The complicity of the US government in the coup has entered the American political psyche as an accepted fact. It forms the basis for the popular film "Missing," and insinuates itself into much of the current debate about US policy in Central America. But the assumption of American responsibility for the Chilean coup is misplaced and promotes a distortion of reality which benefits neither this country nor Chile.

The facts about American involvement in Chile were well documented by investigators led by Sen. Frank Church. The record shows that after Allende won a slight plurality over two other candidates in the 1970 presidential election, the White House went bonkers. President Nixon, fearful of a "second Cuba," whipped the CIA into frenetic activity designed to prevent the Chilean Congress from validating the election results. Nixon failed. Allende was inaugurated, promising the Chilean people a peaceful path to socialism. In Washington, Chile was placed on a back burner, but not forgotten.

For the next three years the United States covertly financed opposition political parties and newspapers and manifested a policy of generalized financial and commercial hostility towards the Allende regime. At the same time, the United States offered Allende the possibility of better relations, if he would drop his insistence on nationalizing American companies without compensation. US policy was designed to pressure Allende and to preserve a democratic political option for the presidential elections scheduled for 1976. The ethics and wisdom of the policy can, and should, be debated. But the debate should recognize that what the US Government did or did not do was peripheral to the struggle taking place among the Chilean people themselves.

Domestic opposition intensified through 1972 and 1973 as large segments of Chilean society became fed up with Allende's broken promises to protect the country's democratic traditions. Chile's system of governmental checks and balances was destroyed as Allende disregarded court orders and congressional dictates. Illegal takeovers of farms, factories, and businesses rampaged, instigated by the most radical elements of the governing coalition. Finally, when convinced of the futility of finding a political solution and alarmed by the growing public violence and government-sponsored dissension within their own ranks, the military intervened. As the Church Committee found, the military conspirators neither sought nor received American assistance in the coup. The events of Sept. 11, 1973 buried Chilean democracy, but it had been dying for several years.

Suspicion of American complicity in the coup was immediate. Congressional investigators had already overturned the rock under which ITT's unaccepted offer to the CIA to finance anti-Allende activities had been hiding. More importantly, the Chilean coup caught us at a painful point in our history. The stench of political and moral corruption hung over Washington. Vice President Agnew resigned shortly after the coup and Nixon, of course, followed. Unlike Chile, the American system proved stronger than its leaders, but the odor of decay lingered, adding our suspected involvement in the coup as another noisome element.

The resulting self-flagellation was consistent with the post-Watergate, post-Vietnam perversion of the myth of American omnipotence.

Our self-image changed from knight in shining armor to accomplice of the Prince of Darkness, but the essential conceit remained: American involvement is the crucial determinant in the unfolding of every political drama.

Does it really make any difference if we assume responsibility for a coup that was not of our making? Why make a fuss? Quite apart from reinforcing a sentimental attachment to the truth, an understanding of what happened in Chile would serve our interests by reminding us that we are neither as malevolent as we sometimes fear nor as powerful as we often foolishly believe.

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Chile would also profit from a dispassionate review of the events which led to Allende's demise. One way or another Chile will get another opportunity to construct a democratic society. If that effort is not based upon a frank recognition of the domestic weaknesses which destroyed the fabric of democracy from 1970 to 1973, the stage will be set for another failure and for the return to more dictatorial rule.

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